

The EU's efforts to promote democracy in its post-Soviet Eastern neighbours would benefit from greater engagement with civil society.

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Since the breakup of the Soviet Union, the EU has attempted to promote democracy in the former Soviet countries of Eastern Europe. [Natalia Shapovalova](#) and [Richard Youngs](#) assess the success of these policies and suggest some key areas for improvement. They argue that while the EU deserves some credit for the progress which has been made over the last two decades, much more needs to be done to make a tangible impact on democracy in the Eastern neighbourhood.



Since the 1990s, the EU has been involved in the promotion of democratic governance in the post-Soviet countries. However, for many years its support for democracy through civil society represented only a small share of total EU aid to the region. More recently, the lack of significant reform in most Eastern neighbourhood countries has enticed the EU into increasing its direct assistance to civil society and involving the latter more systematically in its relations with [Eastern Partnership](#) (EaP) governments. Hence, new regional and bilateral mechanisms have been established and there have been moves to institutionalise EU consultations with local NGOs on a growing number of issues.



Under the EaP, which involves the EU and six Eastern neighbours (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine), the Civil Society Forum has convened annually since 2009, with the participation of the EU and partner countries' NGOs. Over the years, both the scope of the Forum's work and its access to EU policy making and funding have expanded.

As part of the European Commission's and the European External Action Service's (EEAS) post-Arab Spring goal of establishing partnerships with society, EU aid has been made 'more accessible' to civil society organisations (CSOs) through a Neighbourhood Civil Society Facility. In 2011-2013, the Commission allocated approximately €37 million to the Eastern neighbourhood countries under this instrument. Unlike previous aid tools through which EU aid to civil society has been channelled, such as the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights or the thematic programme 'Non-State Actors and Local Authorities in Development', the Facility explicitly aims to develop the capacities of local non-state actors. It also aims to increase their involvement in policy making, including on EU dialogues with, and aid to, partner countries' governments.

The EU has also established a [European Endowment for Democracy](#) (EED). As the EED begins its work in 2013, it promises to provide quick and flexible support to a broader range of actors, including political movements and non-registered NGOs that are not financed under other EU aid instruments. Its initial focus will be on the European neighbourhood, especially on the most difficult political contexts. The initial budget for the EED has reached approximately €16 million, of which the Commission provided €6 million and the rest comes from member states, with Poland alone providing €5 million.

At the bilateral level, the EU has further institutionalised consultations run by delegations in EaP countries on EU assistance priorities and on the implementation of the [European Neighbourhood Policy](#) (ENP). High-level EU representatives, such as ENP and Enlargement Commissioner Štefan Füle, regularly meet with civil society representatives during their visits to EaP countries. Following the example of the [EU-Ukraine Association Agreement](#), it is also expected that the Association Agreements that are currently being negotiated with other EaP countries will contain provisions on civil society, such as commitments to contribute to a favourable environment for civil society and a bilateral civil society platform to monitor the implementation of the agreement.

While the EU endorses new democracy promotion tools through civil society and plans to further boost the level of funding as well as improving the way in which it delivers aid to non-state actors, the Union still has to learn how to deal with a number of challenges. First, the EU needs to further streamline the way in which it delivers aid. The current grants system is too burdensome and complicated: not only for local NGOs, but also for many European NGOs as well. The European Commission should rely on European CSOs, rather than on 'for-profit' consultancies, to provide technical assistance to local actors in the region.

Second, the EU must pay closer attention to the ways in which the legal and political climate for civil society remains unfavourable in the Eastern neighbourhood. Despite past efforts, little has been achieved with regard to promoting a better environment for civil society in the most problematic countries. Third, it is also necessary to involve civil society in the consultations related to the Association Agreement negotiation process and to encourage more discussion on the future content and provisions of the agreements. NGOs can help to inform wider society about the benefits of the future agreement, cultivating public demand for further integration with the EU.

Fourth, the EU must rectify the dearth of dialogue and cooperation between NGOs and government bodies. Public participation in the policy process should be one of the criteria for awarding increased sector-based assistance. Fifth, low public trust in NGOs and low citizen engagement in associational life still blight democratic quality in post-Soviet countries. Community-based approaches to development or support to groups that work with volunteers or raise funds among populations are possible solutions.

Sixth, the EU and its member states still need to find ways to react to more fluid forms of activism in the region, beyond a few generic rhetorical promises to do so. The EED is expected to intervene here whereas other donors must work to build bridges between Western-funded professional 'civil society' and grassroots pro-democracy initiatives driven by endogenous factors. Seventh, in such resilient cases as [Belarus](#), the EU should aim to reach out to broader layers of society, going beyond political groups and pro-European NGOs. Even more projects aimed at youth mobility, exchanges and cooperation in the fields of education, culture, sports and research are needed. The EU should also back up its support for people-to-people contacts by abolishing visa fees for ordinary Belarusians.

Finally, the EU needs to devise its own monitoring and evaluation tools to assess the state of civil society in those countries where its aid is destined. There is a need for more systemic knowledge about civil society developments in neighbouring countries as a precursor to more effective support schemes and evaluation procedures.

The EU deserves much credit for moving its democracy policies in the right direction; but much more needs to be done for such tentative steps to make a tangible difference to those who desire a better quality of democracy in the Eastern neighbourhood.

This article is a shortened version of the FRIDE paper, "[EU Democracy Promotion in the Eastern Neighbourhood: A Turn to Civil Society?](#)".

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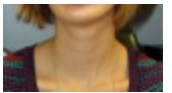
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